THE ENIGMA
Psalm 8, Romans 7:15-25
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At the heart of this Christian faith is the word: God's word about God and about us. It is a living word, expressed in history in the story of a chosen people. It is expressed in the extraordinary life of one we know as God's son. And it is, we believe, a word expressed in the words of an ancient book. Sometimes the lively word of the Lord is heard with new clarity when these ancient words of scripture are brought into dialogue with a modern word. It is a provocative exercise.

Listen now to ancient words and contemporary words, and in the dialogue listen for God's living word to you this day.

First, Psalm 8

> "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!...When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor."

Next, Reinhold Niebuhr, American theologian:

> "Man has always been his own most vexing problem. How shall he think of himself? Every affirmation which he may make about his stature... becomes involved in contradictions when fully analysed." (The Nature and Destiny of Man, p. 1)

Third, St. Paul, writing to the church in Rome (Romans 7):

> "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do...I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Walt Kelley, creator of Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Finally, Sam Keen, philosopher:

> "We crossed Court Street and climbed through a hole in the fence, leaving God, good manners, cleanliness, and all the polite virtues of Presbyterian children behind. The moment we were in the trees, out of sight of home, we became pagans. A short way down the path we stopped, pulled out our stolen pack of Camels from the hollow log, lit up. And coughed. All morning we worked on our fort, cutting saplings with a hatchet we borrowed from Granddad's toolbox, and wove them into walls beneath the felled forked oak. Midafternoon our domain was invaded by a party of picnickers. We became Indians and stalked the unwary, stealing two egg salad sandwiches and a cake when they were not looking. After that we dammed up the creek, went swimming, and tried to catch a crawfish. When the sun went down, we climbed back through the fence, checked to see if our breath still smelled of tobacco, put on the mask of civility, and went home for dinner." (The Passionate Life, p. 46)

week before Christmas. She feared for her life. A man had been assaulting her regularly for two years and the situation had worsened. She was the mother of his child and he threatened to kidnap the baby and do her great physical harm. The story goes on. But two months later and with the legal counsel of a member of this congregation, and the assistance of COMPASS, this young woman is free from the bondage of fear. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his ministry quoting the prophet Isaiah and saying, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives." Thank you for giving me the freedom and for supporting me to minister in this way.

I have been gifted in learning more concretely that God speaks to us in our everyday lives. God calls us to leave our native soil, community, people, for the sake of a promise that we do not fully understand. God is not bound to local soil, but is the God of history, the God of our lives. One of the great joys of ministry is the opportunity to share in the lives of others in times of great joy and sorrow. The task of the parish theologian is not to merely share the experience, but to try to understand life experiences from the perspective of faith. That means asking some hard questions and hearing the tough questions of others. One experience stands out in my mind. A woman was dying of cancer. She had suffered many months and was very thin and weak and close to death. Her daughter asked that I take communion to her in the hospital. And so the three of us met one Sunday afternoon. As I began the communion liturgy, the woman began to cry -- first softly and then rather uncontrollably. I was not sure whether to continue or to stop. I decided to trust God's grace in the mystery of sharing bread and wine. Several times during the liturgy the woman, who had been too weak to speak for days said, "This is not enough!" What a troubling thought to a new pastor. I thought to myself "Of course it's not enough, but it's the most I have to offer." Part of the lesson for me was that it was not what I had to offer at all. I was right to feel inadequate. But when at the end of communion the woman interrupted me and said she wanted to give the final prayer, I knew as I had never known before the deep power of the Lord's Supper. God's presence was known in the breading of bread.

To be a part of people's lives is a priviledge beyond words. For as a minister I much admire told me, "Sharing the lives of people is walking on sacred ground." Such is what Frederick Buechner expressed in his autobiography, The Sacred Journey, "To try to express in even the most insightful and theologically sophistocated terms the meaning of what God speaks through the events of our lives is as precarious a business as to try to express the meaning of the sound of rain on the roof and the spectacles of the setting sun. But I choose to believe that he speaks nonetheless and the reason that his words are impossible to capture in human language is, of course, that they are ultimately always incarnate words. They are words fleshed out in the everydayness no less than in the crises of our own experience."

My time as a sojourner with this congregation has sharpened my desire for intellectual growth. The Calvinist view that religion is faith seeking understanding has been challenged and nurtured in the classes and small groups I have taught. My belief that one reason for being in a faith community is that we learn best by reflecting and being challenged by the ideas and experiences of others has been confirmed. I have loved my teaching ministry here -- which I know has been more learning than teaching. I'm grateful that my thirst for understanding grows. I felt this well expressed by the great black mystic, Howard Thurman, when he wrote, "Always there seems to be something more to be experienced, to be felt, to know. My mind rejects any conclusion as being final. The greatest source of hope, therefore, for both the present and the future, is the awareness of potential in me, in other people, in life itself."

Of the litany of gifts I have received from you there is one other I would like to mention. At my recent Dialogue with the Clergy interview, I was asked what I had found

code hidden in our DNA and Dr. Skinner submits that choice or freedom has little to do with it, and behind it all, 2000 years ago St. Paul called it sin and in his passionate confession to those new Roman Christians described it as a virtual war in his own members, an all-out battle in his very being. Now, the problem is that the low view has been baptized by a religion which hears 50% of what Paul said about us. The result is a diety founded on guilt and an anthropology which sees us fundamentally as sinner, guilty of offending God simply by standing there breathing, guilty by something called original sin, guilty by a depravity which infects and spoils everything. We are not at our best here. Here religion becomes an exercise in emotional blackmail: making people feel awful about themselves and then offering the only solution to its self-generated, self-loathing, namely its own brand of pallative. The low view is not the Biblical view. You and I are asked to account for it on occasion, and we need to know that it is a perversion, as gross oversimplification of the Biblical position.

The Bible, as you may now be concluding, holds both views - simultaneosly. We are, in the wonderful cadences of the ancient Psalmist, "little less than God, crowned with glory and honor, given dominion over the work of God's hands." We are, "created in God's own image," God's children, God's friends. And we are, at the same time, human, which is to say limited, finite, of the earth-made of the dirt. We are flawed, imperfect: that is the meaning of our humanness. It is not the whole story about us, but without it the story is incomplete. "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do," Paul confessed, and in moments of candor most of us are able to identify with that diagnosis.

The Biblical view - is that we are neither totally saint nor totally sinner, but both.

The late Reinhold Niebuhr, in the work to which I referred earlier, helped several generations of Christians to understand the human condition in terms of a tension, a dialectic between the high and low view of humanity. He taught that bad things begin to happen when people feel so good about themselves they forget their limitations, or when people feel so bad about themselves they don't aspire to anything higher than the lowest behavioral common denominator.

Sin comes in two basic forms (Niebuhr taught). Pride - thinking too highly, and sloth - thinking too little of ourselves. As pride, the final form of sin is the unwillingness to admit to sin, a dynamic with which we are all familiar. As intellectual pride, sin becomes an intolerable arrogance. Niebuhr noted that every great thinker concludes that he/she is the final thinker, a conclusion we meet in modest social conversations about politics or economics. If you have trouble with sin as an abstraction, think about intellectual arrogance. How many political partisans do you know who affirm that their positions are finite, limited, partial? Worse yet, is religious pride. And if you are still having difficulty with the abstraction, envision if you will, all the evil in history done by sincerely religious men and women who knew that their way was the only way. The results are The Inquisition, Holy Wars, heretic hunts, and being consigned to eternal hell by your otherwise cheerful friend who has recently seen the light.

Sin as sloth is the simple refusal to be all and as much as we can be: morally, physically, spiritually. I love the story Loren Eisely told about Thomas Huxley, a disciple of Charles Darwin. Huxley was leaving his house in a hurry. A friend asked where he was going, to which he responded: "To tell people they are all apes." Eisely wrote: "It's easy to convince people they are monkeys. The difficult thing is to convince them that they are human beings."